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ABSTRACT

Applying the educational experiences of Arizona as a backdrop, this opinion paper discusses, quite broadly, reform of public education. In Arizona, academic standards have been judged the best in the nation by the Fordham Foundation; to measure academic progress, the state uses only the Stanford 9 test; there has been public school open enrollment for more than 20 years; charters for public charter schools are granted by the state, not the local district; and tax credits are allowed for taxpayers who contribute to organizations that provide scholarships. This paper, written from the perspective of a practicing state superintendent of instruction, begins with a definition of public education: "A public education is that education which is defined by clear academic goals, is regularly measured, and with standards that are achieved." Among the opinions expressed are the following: (1) Children should be free to choose the public schools they want to attend; (2) people fret too much about how much money educators earn; (3) the school-district-based system (local control) needs reforming; (4) children fail because of unrealistic educational expectations; and (5) teacher performance is an important factor in student success. (WFA)

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CENTER FOR CIVIC INNOVATION
AT THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE

Transforming American Education

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What's going on in Arizona's education system is really a backdrop for what's going on across the nation. In Arizona, academic achievement and the motivation for children to be brilliant is increasing.

This progress is made more difficult by the anti-intellectual impulses in our society. Let me give you an example. We have set very high academic standards in Arizona. They've been reviewed as the best in the nation by The Fordham Foundation. Yet it's not uncommon for me to walk into a community meeting and have a school principal stand up and say, "I couldn't pass a test based on these standards," and be applauded by his staff and parents.

Think about the implications. You come in and say "algebra and geometry are great to know, it's such a wonderful discipline for the mind," and the response you get from parents is, "My daughter wants to be an actress. She'll never need Algebra."

Are we prepared to discipline our children's minds? The reason we teach algebra and geometry is not because we believe that everybody's going to be an engineer. Unfortunately, teaching for the purpose of creating a disciplined mind has been thrown out the window because we focus too much on preparing children for future jobs at too young an age.

I'll ask my seven-year-old what she's going to do for a living, and her response is different every day. She'll come into my room and say, "Mom, I could be so many things." Those are the best days for a parent. My job as superintendent is to create that possibility and that mindset for any child.

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My definition of public education, beyond just embracing the power of the intellect, is this: A public education is that education which is defined by clear academic goals, is regularly measured, and with standards that are achieved. It is provided to any child living in a state who wants to come into that state' s public education system, and it is equally supported by taxes that we all share in. And importantly, the schools children attend in this system are chosen, not assigned. This last point is a critical difference with

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the current system.

A child should not attend the school that's across the street just because it's across the street. There might be a better teaching methodology for a child somewhere else. It truly is the case that children are different, that families are different, that teaching methodologies are different. We embrace the fact that different people have different needs in every other aspect of our life except public education. There we have a "one size fits all" mindset. The best school for your child is always the one right next door. It's goofy.

We also should not obsess about who gets the money that children receive for their education. Today, the system says it does not want anybody involved in education to make a profit. The system in Arizona has eight hundred thousand kids. It's a five billion dollar operation. Superintendents are paid six-figure salaries. It is already a gloriously profitable business for many people. We ought not to swoon when we hear that private enterprise wants a part of that. We ought to care that the real profit ultimately goes to the children—that children profit from the education enterprise—and not worry so much about the monetary profit earned by providers.

One obstacle to achieving real education reform is that we keep trying to reform the closed system by reforming school districts. Even my own party, the Republicans, are wedded to the school district-based education system, which they call "local control."

"Local control" is a monopoly. "Local control" is a governing board that is responsible for everybody. It does not welcome competition. The individuals who sit as governing board members are mostly fabulous people. But we've given them the wrong job.

They ought to be in the business of starting up schools. They ought to say to schools, "You're either making it or you're not. You run your schools. You tell us what you're going to do, and if you don't do it, we're going to put you out of business and put somebody else in there. That's my job as a board member."

Instead, board members run the schools. They don't let the schools have their money. They hire and fire everybody on the basis of one contract. They behave the way a monopoly behaves, because the laws have written them into that role. It's a tragedy of good people in a bad system.

To define public education as I did earlier is to strap the money on the back of children. The money is for the children, it is not for the system. Strap it to their back. Let them find a good school. When you do that, education becomes a force. It changes education from being an oppressive obligation. You hear this attitude in the public charter schools, which say, "We are so excited, and we want you to come to our school."

Compare that energetic enthusiasm to the attitude found in the current system. When a mom takes her precious five-year-old to enroll in school, she asks about kindergarten. Do you know what the number one question she hears is?

You would hope it would be something like, "What's your child's name? What are you looking for? What are your academic hopes for your child? What kind of teaching do you like? Can we take you on a tour?" Does any of that get asked? No. The question is,

"Where do you live?" In other words, "You might not be our responsibility." "Where do you live?" There's no joy in that transaction. There's no belief that this is going to be magic for everybody. It ought to be a different ethic.

There are many different ways to institute school choice. I believe that the traditional public school districts ought to be a part of this. I do not believe in the false dichotomy of public charter schools versus traditional schools. My husband and I have three children still in school, and they are all in traditional public schools. But, we have chosen those schools. I drive an hour to get to the one our younger children go to.

The issue is not whether there is one governing form that's better than another. There are options and individual choices within each of those governing systems that are fantastic, and so you need to choose.

What types of choice do families have in Arizona? We have had public school open enrollment for twenty years in Arizona. Vouchers that allow money to go into schools of choice that are private have been proposed in Arizona for eight years. It's become a legislative ritual. The bill fails every year by two votes in the Senate. It died again, this year.

We have tax credits so that people can give money to organizations which turn around and provide scholarships for children. It can't benefit the donor's child, directly.

Let me talk about public charter schools. We said in Arizona that our charter school bill, which passed in 1994, was going to be a little bit different. Like New York, I'm happy to say, we don't have to apply to local school districts to start public charter schools. We go straight up to the State Board of Education, or the State Board for Charter Schools. Charter schools are public schools. They are required to take anybody who comes. They are required to follow the state' s academic standards, and to test children the way we test all of our public school kids. They are also required to account for the use of their money.

Government does not own their buildings. We give them a small stipend which recognizes their need to go out and get financing, but we don't own their buildings. They are responsible for that. This system is much more efficient for the taxpayer.

We now have 310 public charter schools in Arizona, with over 30,000 children in them. When I go home, we will have more than that. One reason for this large number is that in Arizona, we charter a franchise organization that wants to build public charter schools.

If you have a credible organization that wants to build a school, they will know best when they need to build another one, because they have to make money at this. You ought not put them in the position of coming to you and applying yet again. If you believe in their program, let them do it. We just make them notify us when they're going to open up a new site. That's how charter schools proliferate. They notify our staff, and we make sure that all their permits are in. Those schools are wildly innovative.

We've had incredible press, both positive and negative. First, the negative. *U.S. News & World Report* wrote a story about the schools that had tanked in Arizona. Out of 310

schools, six have been closed—six. You will read about those schools over and over and over again. We had one guy who was running a school whose prized possession was his educational certificate, which was a management course at Dairy Queen.

The overall story is much more positive. We have generally had incredibly successful academic programs. One of these is a Direct Instruction school. Direct Instruction is a proven, effective methodology, particularly for kids who don't have an academically rich environment, kids coming from a home where there is not somebody sitting at the table firing questions all the time. Direct Instruction is very specifically-scripted, "I say this, you say that." There is no incidental learning. It is quite structured. There are also uniforms and character instruction. They use The Book of Virtues as their curriculum.

That school had 200 kids when it opened last year. It now has 840, with no marketing.

We also have schools that focus on the arts. A lot of incredible high schools take mostly kids who have dropped out, and then they start teaching them course work on top of their theatre and other arts training. These are phenomenal high schools, making tremendous progress.

We researched the public charter school system versus the traditional public school system. I think this research is very preliminary and we ought not clump them together like this. The public charter school system, K-8, made more academic progress from 1996-97 to 1997-98 than the traditional public school system. In the high schools, that was not true. The traditional school system was better, relatively, than the public charter schools. However, students didn't make a year's worth of educational progress in either traditional high schools or the charter high schools.

Arguably, it is worse to be in high school than out of it, if you're looking at the results. It is a tragedy in America, right now, and we need to deal with it. The point, though, is when you take a look at the research and you disengage from those "clumping" analyses, what you can see is that there is no basis on which to compare public charter schools to other systems. They don't behave one way or the other. A school is a school, and we should get over the notion that even a school district has anything to do with the quality of a particular school.

In Arizona, we look at academic progress. We compare year-after-year scores on a norm-referenced test. We convert them to normal curve equivalents, so that we're not looking at relative scores. We're looking for whether a school provides its kids with a year's worth of academic progress. This is very important research. When we look solely at school-based results, we find some schools within the same district that are in the top ten percent of gainers and others in the bottom ten percent of gainers. There is nothing about a school district that tells you about the quality of the school. The quality of a school has to do with the school leadership and the teachers in that school. That is why you should strap the money to the kid's back, and why you should emphasize schools, not district offices.

The people in the current education system often talk about education as though they have no idea what works. It's just a mystery. A series of articles written in the *LA Times* last year about the decline in public education in California makes this point very clear. Over and over again, the school leadership would say, "This is not our responsibility."

It blamed forces outside the school. It blamed poverty. It blamed ethnicity. I have a colleague who says the current education system is the only system in the world, where if they were running an airline they would blame the passengers when a plane goes down.

Every time test scores come out in Arizona I get the question, "Isn't it true that this school is wealthy or this school is white, and this school is not?"

My answer to that is, "Surely, you did not mean to ask me that, because I am offended. What you are saying is that a child, because of the way she looks—or where she lives, or what she has—has a limited capacity to learn. I thought we were far past this argument."

Educational failure is not due to the children. It is due to the expectation that is set up for the children. It is due to how much you believe they can do, what your educational standard is, and whether you test all children with the same test. You don't create different tests and apologize for a teacher's inability to move a child along. It is unethical.

Any of us who do not stand up when that question gets asked and say, "I object," are doing our kids a disservice. Because you read that premise everywhere and every day, and we need to start saying, "I object."

I can prove to you that that premise is not true. All across the board in Arizona, we look at academic progress in every band. No matter how much progress is being made—whether a child starts at the 88th percentile in absolute scores, or the 23rd percentile—there's no difference in the degree of progress she can make. The differential—and Bill Sanders at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville has demonstrated this better than anybody—is that there is only one issue that seems to relate to the progress of children. It's not wealth, not ethnicity, not homework, not parents. It is the baccalaureate grade point average of the teacher. So far, that's all we can find. In other words, it might be that teaching has an effect on learning.

We in Arizona use only the Stanford 9 test to measure academic progress. We give that every year, second through eleventh grade. We look at the annual academic progress. We also give a criterion progress test, based on our standards. We give this second test because of these incidents I've told you about, where high school principals stand up and say, "I can't do it, our kids don't need to know this."

I took that second test myself when the kids took it last week. I have promised that they could publish my scores on the front page of the paper. My parents will receive a report from the testing company, telling them how their daughter needs to improve, but I hopefully passed it.

The message we're trying to send is that we ought not be afraid of setting a high standard, and say, "Won't it just be great when our kids can do this?"

Some newspaper reporter asked me, "Won't it be a shame when people are too nervous to come into Arizona because our school standards will be so much different than everybody else's?

I said, "Oh, from your lips to God's ears, we should have such problems." Yes, I look

forward to that conversation when someone says, "You know, Intel would like to expand in Arizona, but Lisa, those schools are just too hard."

Oh, what bliss! I can't wait!

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